. . . the Lives and Concerns of Susan Brownmiller

By Sally Quinn

There is a soft flush to her cheeks. Her pink silk blouse reflects the traces of leftover TV makeup. Her curly brown hair is tousled. She tucks her feet up under her in the white velvet chair and lights a cigarette. As she blows the smoke out she grins.

"It's funny isn't it," she says, "that I had to become a feminist and write a book on rape to learn how to put on makeup."

Susan Brownmiller is 40 years old. She was born on Susan B. Anthony's Birthday. ("That's important.") She's spent the last four years writing a book on rape, and now she's promoting it. It's called "Against Our Will; Men, Women and Rape."

"I wish I could have published the book while I was still 39," she says with a laugh. "Like Jack Benny." Then she reflects. "But writing the book has made getting old easier. I have a feeling of a sense of accomplishment. It's important especially for a woman. Otherwise you'd be looking in a mirror having nothing but your fading beauty." She brightens. "But how could I think about being 40. My book was coming out."

That doesn't exactly sound like a feminist talking. Or at least what you might expect to hear from a feminist. But Brownmiller is much more complicated than that. And full of surprises. One minute she sounds like a hard-line militant, the next she sounds like a "Cosmo girl."

She is easy to talk to, speaks in a quiet, soft voice, laughs easily, sometimes in a zany giggle when she's said something that strikes her as particularly funny.

She has a good sense of humor about herself and a good sense of where she has come from and where she's going. Only when she gets on the subject of rape — though she herself has never been raped — does her personality, her posture, her body language, her facial expression change. She tenses up, she becomes zealous, dogmatic, unbending in her attitudes. Any statement she has made on rape becomes the definite definitive statement, no matter how controversial, how irregular. There is no discussing it. She is not ready to talk about it yet, really. She's been working on it too long. She is too involved. She cares too much. She cannot separate herself from her declaration.

Statements such as "men who commit rape have served, in effect, as front-line masculine shock troops, terrorist guerrillas in the longest sustained battle the world has ever known," have drawn criticism even from feminists.

She has flashes of realizing that she tends to be doctrinaire. She will say she

See BROWNMILLER, C6, Col. 1

By Harry Naltchayan — The Washington Post

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Northeastern Regional Pesticide Coordinators, a group of entomologists and plant pathologists of 12 northeast land grant universities, rate Sevin as relatively non-hazardous if label directions are followed closely. However, it is highly toxic to bees and should not be used when and where they are active. Bees

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Regarding the Lives and Concerns of Susan Brownmiller

BROWNMILLER, From C1

wants to write comedy and screenplays and get away from the subject. She talks about living with a man during part of the time she was writing the book.

He was Kevin Cooney, a Reuter correspondent. "Kevin would constantly remind me that not all men were rapists, not all men had the psychology to commit rape. I needed to be reminded of that. You get deep into your work and you get so involved that you begin to think rape is the basis of the sex act. It was very important for me to have him around. I'd make some rash statement and he'd say, 'c'mon now.'"

She and Cooney have since split up. It happened in the middle of the book. "We needed separate space," she says simply. Then, "There are some men who really do like strong assertive women, but I get the feeling that if my book is very successful and I'm acknowledged as a serious thinker, it would have to terrify most men and, in fact, I'm pricing myself out of the market."

This, however, is not her major concern right now.

Her major concern is promoting her book, getting her point across, basking in the glow of her newfound success, a success she has been striving for since she was a child, showing off for those people who once told her, "Susan, you're a behind-the-scenes person."

"I take pleasure in being out front — sure, absolutely."

Susan Brownmiller has been a feminist as long as she can remember. "I've always been a gut feminist, no doubt about it. I've tried to trace it back, the feeling I've always had, the gut reality that women were as good as men."

Possibly it was seeing her mother work hard to support the family while she was growing up in Flatbush, the product of a middle-class Jewish family with a long ethnic sounding name that began with a W. She won't say what it was. She changed her name when she was 20. She wanted to change it to Winemiller as in Alma Winemiller, the heroine in Tennessee Williams' "Summer and Smoke." She was an actress at the time and had always wanted to play Alma. But she decided if she ever did play the role it would sound funny to have the same name, so she changed Wine to Brown.

It was probably her mother, a secretary-bookkeeper, who instilled in her the importance of being independent.

But neither of her parents lived to see her publish this book. "I'm really sorry mother died before I finished this book," she says. "She would have understood every word. Whatever we strive for in life, it's really saying, 'Look Mommy, look Daddy, aren't you proud?' I've missed my parents most during this time."

She went to Cornell, became a radical on the train going up to school her freshman year in the early '50's when a group of kids impressed her by playing the guitar and talking about the (long-ago concl [illegible] Spanish Civil War. "That became my gang."

She quit Cornell, where she had originally studied to become a lawyer, to go to New York and become an actress. "I made the rounds; I was in two off-Broadway plays but I was so wrong for it. I was not then and I am not now the Hollywood ingenue. There was no way I was going to be a starlet. I didn't fit the stereotype of those years. It seems to me now that so many women in the '50s who wanted to do serious things found release in the theater. The brightest women I know in the '50s went into acting."

"That was my unhappy period," she says. "I call them my lost years. The rejections were always in person. I'd go home and hide under the covers." Fortunately, she had a good analyst who told her she should write.

She did begin writing and editing for Coronet magazine, but continued to drift in and out of movements.

She did everything. She got involved in civil rights, and went to Mississippi. She flirted with the Communist Party, fought against the Vietnam war, picketed and went to meetings, wrote passionate articles and generally identified herself with every radical movement there was. She even lived for a time with lawyer-activist Mark Lane. She seemed almost to be looking for the perfect cause.

Later she went to Philadelphia and worked as a street reporter for CBS, and then moved to New York to become a network news reporter for ABC hoping to get on camera. She didn't. "Instead they sent out a call to the Ford model agency looking for a cute blonde." So she quit and began freelancing.

She was living with Cooney at the time. "We wrote out a formal contract. He knew that as a freelancer I'd not be making much money. He agreed to absorb all deficits. So there I was, holding my own, freelancing, when the women's movement started. I threw myself into conscipusness-raising groups."

It was Susan Brownmiller who helped found the New York Radical Feminists in 1968.

And, she will tell you beaming, "I led the sit-in at the Ladies Home Journal. It's really scary to do something like that. I'm so proud of it. Oh, I just adored it. We had a wonderful time." She pauses to reminisce, then says, "You know, the funny thing is, Karl Meyer of The Washington Post wrote the best story about it. I learned something. You can't always expect the women to write the best story."

She agrees that she's belonged to an awful lot of groups in her life. "It seems that with feminism, though, I have found one cause I can expect to stay with the rest of my life." She didn't go to any meetings the whole time she was writing the book, she says. "I thought I would be more effective as a writer than as a movement organizer. There's just something in my personality that, even though I've been drawn to groups and activism all my life, I can't really say the group has responded well to me. My personality is too abrasive. It sticks out. It's too idiosyncratic. I'm not cut out to be a politician. Within the movement I seem to have controversy swirling around me. I understand the importance of submerging my ego, but the group's response to me was a little nervous about my ego."

It was through one of her consciousness-raising groups that she began to get interested in rape and after doing a story on the Giles-Johnson rape case in Maryland and holding a speak-out on rape she decided that "a research job needed to be done. It came to me that I wanted to write a book about rape."

The book is finished now, more than 400 pages, and she's waiting to see how she will be received. "I'm not yet convinced that the male intellectual establishment, The New York Review of Books or The Times Literary supplement will let me in. Is it important to me? No," she says with a doubtful laugh. "It'll keep me pure if they don't."

Now she wants to relax, to start writing her comedies. "I've made my statement." She has no desire to marry or have children. "I'd be a poor wife and an anxiety-ridden mother." She wouldn't mind living with someone else again "as long as we have lots of space." And, of course, she still has her feminism.

"I remember seeing Bette Davis once on the Dick Cavett Show," she says. "He asked her if she minded if he lit her cigarette and she said, 'I'm not a women's libberrrrrrr,'" and she mocks the word.

She stops for a moment and lights another cigarette, smiles wryly. "You'll know that I've totally cracked up if you ever hear that I've said on some TV show, 'Oh, I'm not a women's libber.'"